

# The Hundredth Monkey Revisited

By Elaine Myers

Going back to the original sources  
puts a new light on this popular story

*Is there some magic key that provides a short cut to cultural transformation?*

*Elaine Myers has had articles in issues #2, #5, and #7. She lives in rural southwest Washington state.*

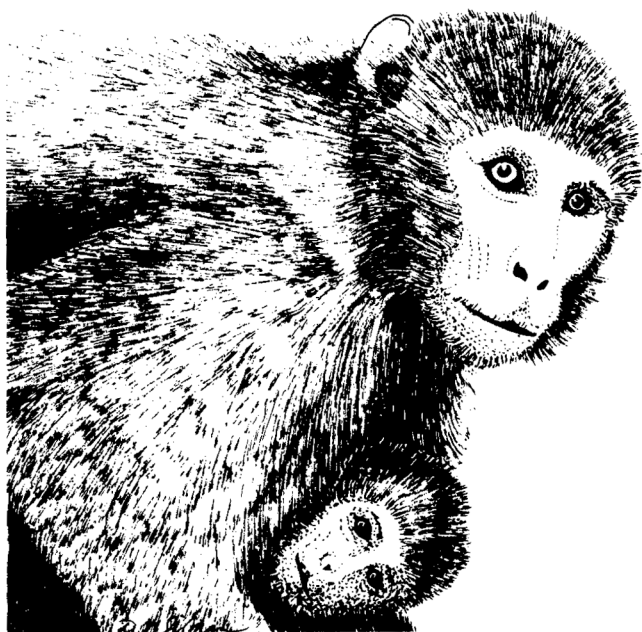
THE STORY OF "The Hundredth Monkey" has recently become popular in our culture as a strategy for social change. Lyall Watson first told it in *Lifetide* (pp147-148), but its most widely known version is the opening to the book *The Hundredth Monkey*, by Ken Keyes. (See box.) The story is based on research with monkeys on a northern Japanese Island, and its central idea is that when enough individuals in a population adopt a new idea or behavior, there occurs an ideological breakthrough that allows this new awareness to be communicated directly from mind to mind without the connection of external experience and then *all* individuals in the population spontaneously adopt it. "It may be that when enough of us hold something to be true, it becomes true for everyone." (Watson, p148)

I found this to be a very appealing and believable idea. The concept of Jung's collective unconscious, and the biologists' morphogenetic fields (*IN CONTEXT* #6) offer parallel stories that help strengthen this strand of our imaginations. Archetypes, patterns, or fields that are themselves without mass or energy, could shape the individual manifestations of mass and energy. The more widespread these fields are, the greater their influence on the physical level of reality. We sometimes mention the Hundredth Monkey Phenomenon when we need supporting evidence of the possibility of an optimistic scenario for the future, especially a future based on peace instead of war. If enough of us will just think the right thoughts, then suddenly, almost magically, such ideas will become reality.

However, when I went back to the original research reports cited by Watson, I did not find the same story that he tells. Where he claims to have had to improvise details, the research reports are quite precise, and they do not support the "ideological breakthrough" phenomenon. At first I was disappointed; but as I delved deeper into the research I found a growing appreciation for the lessons the real story of these monkeys has for us. Based on what I have learned from the Japan Monkey Center reports in *Primates*, vol. 2, vol. 5 and vol. 6, here is how the real story seems to have gone.

Up until 1958, Keyes' description follows the research quite closely, although not *all* the young monkeys in the troop learned to wash the potatoes. By March, 1958, 15 of the 19 young monkeys (aged two to seven years) and 2 of the 11 adults were washing sweet potatoes. Up to this time, the propagation of the innovative behavior was on an individual basis, along family lines and playmate relationships. Most of the young monkeys began to wash the potatoes when they were one to two and a half years old. Males older than 4 years, who had little contact with the young monkeys, did not acquire the behavior.

By 1959, the sweet potato washing was no longer a new behavior to the group. Monkeys that had acquired the behavior as juveniles were growing up and having their own babies. This new generation of babies learned sweet potato washing behavior through the normal cultural pattern of



the young imitating their mothers. By January, 1962, almost all the monkeys in the Koshima troop, excepting those adults born before 1950, were observed to be washing their sweet potatoes. If an individual monkey had not started to wash sweet potatoes by the time he was an adult, he was unlikely to learn it later, regardless of how widespread it became among the younger members of the troop.

In the original reports, there was no mention of the group passing a critical threshold that would impart the idea to the entire troop. The older monkeys remained steadfastly ignorant of the new behavior. Likewise, there was no mention of widespread sweet potato washing in other monkey troops. There was mention of occasional sweet potato washing by individual monkeys in other troops, but I think there are other simpler explanations for such occurrences. If there was an Imo in one troop, there could be other Imo-like monkeys in other troops.

Instead of an example of the spontaneous transmission of ideas, I think the story of the Japanese monkeys is a good example of the propagation of a paradigm shift, as in Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The truly innovative points of view tend to come from those on the edge between youth and adulthood. The older generation continues to cling to the world view they grew up with. The new idea does not become universal until the older generation withdraws from power, and a younger generation matures within the new point of view.

It is also an example of the way that simple innovations can lead to extensive cultural change. By using the water in connection with their food, the Koshima monkeys began to exploit the sea as a resource in their environment. Sweet potato washing led to wheat washing, and then to bathing behavior and swimming, and the utilization of sea plants and animals for food. "Therefore, provisioned monkeys suffered changes in their attitude and value system and were given foundations on which pre-cultural phenomena developed." (M Kawai, *Primates*, Vol 6, #1, 1965).

What does this say about morphogenetic fields, and the collective unconscious? Not very much, but the "ideological breakthrough" idea is not what Sheldrake's theory of morphogenetic fields would predict anyway. That theory would recognize that the behavior of the older monkeys (not washing) *also* is a well established pattern. There may well be a "critical mass" required to shift a new behavior from being a fragile personal idiosyncrasy to being a well established alternative, *but creating a new alternative does not automatically displace older alternatives*. It just provides more choices. It is possible that the washing alternative established by the monkeys on Koshima Island did create a morphogenetic field that made it easier for monkeys on other islands to "discover" the same technique, but the actual research neither supports nor denies that idea. It remains for other cultural experiments and experiences to illuminate this question.

What the research does suggest, however, is that holding positive ideas (as important a step as this is) is not suffi-

cient *by itself* to change the world. We still need direct communication between individuals, we need to translate our ideas into action, and we need to recognize the freedom of choice of those who choose alternatives different from our own. □